The UB Foreign Language Roundtable

The Purpose of the Publication

To provide UB students with knowledge of the target cross-world cultures and societies, in a relaxed non- or semi-academic manner, in order to promote mutual understanding and respect among the people living in the target countries.

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The UB Foreign Language Roundtable is published by the International College twice a year: Spring and Fall.
In May of this past year, Dr. William Jassey concluded his remarkable stay on this ephemeral grand stage, known as Mother Earth. We would like to dedicate this issue of the Language Roundtable to his legacy. Professor Jassey was a people person. He had a thousand questions for new visitors to the University and a strong desire to understand his students and fellow professors through interfacing with them, understanding their country of origin, ethnicity, beliefs as protocols of language and culture. Professor Jassey especially wanted to know people as individuals, to be able to laugh and share with them and be not only a teacher but a friend. He was profoundly kind to and respectful of others. He gave those blessed to cross his path a sense of meaning and value. The list of students who visited the home of William and Ikuko Jassey is long and may well be the longest of any staff or faculty member of the University. The Jasseys were more than teachers to their students; they were family.

Professor Jassey did his undergraduate study at Brooklyn College and his doctorate at Columbia University. His specialization was language and language instruction. He served as an interpreter in the United States Military. But from the start when he mentored his siblings (when his father passed away prematurely) Professor Jassey’s heart was always that of a teacher, and professionally a teacher of foreign languages. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that language is one of the best ways to understand the mind and heart of a nation and the people who make up that nation. No one understood that better than Dr. Jassey and few could match his burning desire to convey that feeling to others.

Soon after completing his studies, Dr. Jassey became a professor of foreign languages at SUNY Oneonta. He quickly attained tenure. However, when an opportunity came for him to play an important role in fostering interest in the study of foreign languages in Southern Connecticut, he gave up tenure to teach high school students, recognizing that interest in the study of foreign language must begin prior to the University. Dr. Jassey played a pioneering role in developing exchange programs between Japanese and Connecticut high school students. He also played an important role and served as one of the inspirations for the Center for Global Studies at the Brian McMahon Secondary School in Norwalk, Connecticut where Chinese, Japanese and Arabic are taught.

Here in the State of Connecticut Dr. Jassey served on a variety of advisory boards and committees aimed at promoting Global Studies and language studies. Most recently I was privileged to serve with him on the Connecticut Department of Higher Education’s Advisory Council on International Education Policy. At the conclusion of the first round of discussions on this topic, Dr. Jassey spoke before the Board of Governors in an impassioned way, regarding the need for greater emphasis on the study of language and on the study of less commonly taught languages, in particular. Dr. Jassey felt that the federal government’s strong emphasis on math and science alone was misguided. There is, he emphasized, the need to supplement this with programs aimed at promoting the study of foreign languages. His commitment in this area will be missed. Hopefully, through our work here at the University of Bridgeport emphasizing the study of less commonly taught foreign languages, we can demonstrate the correctness of his vision.
When the Japan Disaster Relief program took place at UB this Spring, one UB professor was so impressed by Dr. Jassey and his interaction with his wife, Dr. Ikuko Jassey, that he asked everyone at his table, “Do you know what the key to a long and happy life is?” And he quickly answered, “Marry a Japanese woman!” Dr. Jassey and his wife had a remarkable relationship and their couple had the ability to light up a room. Bill Jassey was 81 years old. I had assumed that he was no more than 70 until I heard a poem by Ikuko, hinting that he was older than I had thought. Dr. Jassey had the fresh and absorbent mind of a teenager, a bright mind and a great sense of humor. Dr. Ikuko Jassey and their students kept him youthful and energized.

So often Dr. William Jassey visited my office with a new article or an exciting book. I found him always positive, always enthusiastic and ALWAYS uplifting. His visits and his great love of learning will be something I will forever cherish.

UB is so fortunate that in his earthly trek, William Jassey crossed our path. For that we can all be grateful and honor his legacy through this journal which was initiated by his spouse and through improving the language pedagogy at UB and spreading Dr. Jassey’s contagious love of language, his enthusiasm for people and his example of care, love and concern for others.
A Story of an Educator
Dr. Ikuko Anjo Jassey

William skipped two grades in elementary school, so when he was admitted to Brooklyn College, one of the five New York City colleges, he was only sixteen years old. In the same year, his father passed away at the age of forty-nine, leaving his wife and six young children behind. William worked as a tutor after class on weekdays and as a typist at a factory on Saturdays to support his mother and himself financially.

After graduating from college, he went to Syracuse University for a master’s degree with a full scholarship as a graduate teaching assistant. A year before his graduation from Syracuse, the Korean War broke out. Soon he was recruited into the U.S. Army and assigned to Military Intelligence as an interrogator for war prisoners.

With the G.I. Bill, William went to Columbia University for his doctorate. At the same time, he worked fulltime at a junior high school and eventually at a high school as a Spanish/Latin/Italian teacher. Despite the fact that he needed just 60 credits at Columbia to fulfill the 90 some credits required for the doctoral program, he took 140 credits, in addition to the 33 credits he had earned at Syracuse. Amazingly, thus, he fully utilized all the money provided by the U.S. government and received a doctor’s degree eight years later. He completed his education, from kindergarten through graduate school, without using any private funds, except for textbook fees. He was thirty-two years old.

Upon receiving his doctorate, he was employed by the New York State University in Oneonta as a full professor. Based on a newspaper clipping that I found among old notebooks and memorabilia, he was “the youngest full professor in the entire state.” He taught Spanish Literature and Romance Languages (Spanish/French). William loved every bit of his work there. Unfortunately, however, he soon had to give up this position due to a family matter.

Shortly thereafter, William was recruited as a supervisor of foreign languages at the Norwalk Board of Education in Connecticut. There he set up a myriad of new programs, trained teachers, and wrote grants, all with great interest and enthusiasm. Ten years later, the Norwalk school district had come to be recognized statewide for its excellent foreign language program. The inter-district magnet school now called the Center for Global Studies (which was initially known as the Center for Japanese Studies Abroad) founded by him at Brien McMahon High School in 1991 might have been one of his most prominent pieces of work in his thirty-four years as a supervisor. Besides working in Norwalk, he taught at nearby colleges as an adjunct professor; he established the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program, which has now been developed into a department through the years, at Manhattanville College, Fairfield University, and Pace University in White Plains.

William retired from Norwalk in 1999. Well, he was supposed to retire. However, two weeks before his retirement, he received a phone call from the University of Bridgeport. Since then, for twelve years, he worked as director of the International Degree Program at the School of Education.

One of his brothers used to tell him, “You know, you could be anything, a medical doctor, a lawyer, or anything. But you chose to become a teacher. That’s why you can’t make the big bucks.” Each time, William responded to his brother, saying, “I had no interest in becoming a doctor, a lawyer, or anything else. I have always wanted to be a
teacher. Money is not my priority.” In his elementary school graduation album, he wrote that he wanted to be a teacher. Since then he had never wavered from his desire and indeed he became a teacher. The year of 2011 celebrated his 63rd year as an educator. “If I were to be reborn, I would like to be an educator again who works for children,” he wrote in the notice of his retirement submitted to the then Superintendent of the Norwalk Board of Education in 1999.

In 2002, the European Council in Barcelona suggested that European children in primary school should learn at least two foreign languages in the course of their academic careers. They held that the advantages of language study would be immense. Among the benefits observed, language study would:

- assist the role languages play in developing mutual understanding in a multicultural society;
- improve employability and ensure a competitive edge for European businesses.

Most individuals educated in Europe experience foreign language study as a part of their curriculum from early in their formative years. The experience is deemed to be of value, not only from a cultural perspective but also from a practical one. I remember being in graduate school with a student from Basil. Aside from his local Swiss dialect, he was also fluent in French, German, Italian, and English. Just consider the markets that would naturally be opened to him, simply on account of his ability to communicate with others.

It might be argued that Europe is a much smaller geographical area than is North America or the United States; all with many foreign languages within close proximity to one another. Therefore it might make more sense for Europeans to be able to converse in other languages. Do American high school curricula express the same requirement to provide language study? Not always. My view is that Americans who travel assume that English will be spoken or at least understood wherever they go. The need to learn foreign languages seems not to hold the importance that it once did. I find it interesting that many of my American students may have studied a year or two of French or Spanish in school, and then promptly forgotten whatever they had learned following their last exam. On the other hand, foreign students who attend the University of Bridgeport seem to be conversant in many languages, often more than two. Over the years, I have marveled at foreign students who have taken my Public Speaking class and have been able to deliver speeches in nearly perfect English after having had exposure to the language often for less than two years. What does this say about where American high school students will be in the future when it comes to competing for jobs or simply assuming a role in a multi-cultural world?

The high school in my home town continues to offer the traditional studies of French, Latin, and Spanish, but recently added another language: Mandarin. This variety of selection demonstrates a rich appreciation for the classics, but also points an eye in a new direction. I believe that Mandarin stands among the languages with which future generations of Americans are going to have to wrestle. From a geo-political standpoint as well as a practical one, our future may well be woven with the politics, economy, and culture of the Chinese in ways that we cannot predict at this point. The teaching of Mandarin is a step in the right direction, both in terms of understanding the culture as well as attempting to widen the existing business climate.

I see a future in America which may well be based on the requirements of the European Council when it comes to required foreign language study. If the next generation of Americans is going to succeed in business, facility with foreign language will continue to be required. But more than this, as languages are learned, so cultures are better understood and this world becomes a smaller place in which to live.
Madame Butterfly
Dr. Ikuko Anjo Jassey

"You know, Chinese people say that the best life is experienced when the wife is Japanese, the husband is Chinese, and the house is American," said the Dean of a university in China, a Chinese woman in her fifties, in the spring of 2011. I hadn’t heard of this novel version; a Chinese man makes the best husband. Oh, well, there are several versions. The version I’m familiar with involves “a Japanese wife, Chinese food, and an American house.” And yet, it seems that a Japanese woman as the best wife keeps an unshakable position. What makes her the best wife? It’s known that the image of a Japanese woman as an ideal woman was spread all over the world with the successful production of Puccini’s “Madame Butterfly” in 1904; however, I didn’t realize that there were some men who openly would value those Madame Butterfly qualities without hesitation even today. It’s been a long time since the species of butterfly called “Madame Butterfly” went extinct.

Japanese women educated directly or indirectly with the ideas of Buddhism and Confucianism were surely docile and obedient. In those teachings, women were impure, unredeemable, and inferior beings. So whatever her husband said or did, he was always right. Moreover, if a woman did not bear a baby, her husband could divorce her lawfully up until one hundred years ago. Indeed, a Japanese woman was compelled to demonstrate self-abnegating obedience to her father when she was young, to her husband after marriage, and to her son in widowhood.

Today, finding a “Madame Butterfly” — who is weak, dependent, patient, docile, subservient, devoted, and self-sacrificing—is more difficult a task than catching an almost extinct bird. Surely, as some people claim, Japanese women might be in general a little more quiet and less assertive than women from other countries, especially those from Western countries. And it’s because Japanese culture still nurtures and values—to a certain degree—these qualities as preferable feminine traits, i.e., the male-made ideal images of femininity. According to the recent data provided by Chizuko Ueno, a sociologist, and the Japanese government, an ideal woman for today’s young Japanese men is quiet, skilled in domestic chores, adorable, humble, and reserved; this survey shows that the image of ideal women hasn’t changed much. These women are perhaps perfect for men who pursue nothing, except “comfort” and “convenience” in their marriage. (The term “tsuma” [wife] etymologically means “garnish” or “support.” Imagine the shredded white daikon radish humbly sitting next to sashimi in order to make it look shiny and beautiful.) Sadly enough, to attempt to fill these ideal images desired by Japanese as well as some non-Japanese men, you will witness young Japanese women who look and act like a “girl” by putting emphasis on their cuteness, innocence, and helplessness, resulting in their appearing immature and unintelligent.

In reality, however, those Japanese women awakened by the democratic current called gender equality are not interested in taking the position of a Madame Butterfly. Then, are modern Japanese women enthusiastic about getting married? Based on the 2005 census, the percentage of women between 30-34 years old who stay single has drastically increased: 7.2% (1970), 9.1% (1980), 13.9% (1990),
19.7% (1995), and 32.0% (2005). In addition, approximately 7% of women never get married in their lifetime. The reasons why they keep their single status may vary. Possibly, some are not interested in becoming a caregiver for a husband as well as a husband’s aged parents, in addition to doing all the house chores, and raising the children. And, most notably, today’s women are able to support themselves financially. ¹

Japanese women have been changing and will continue to change. Young Japanese women today are not like their grandmother in whom you can still trace Madame Butterfly qualities. Thus, we have to observe a woman (or a man) as an individual without relying on stereotypical notions based on nationality, race, or ethnicity that tend to mislead us.

¹ On the other hand, interestingly enough, the percentage of international marriages has risen: It was 4.9% of the total marriages (34,293 out of 707,734) in 2009, while it was 0.9% in 1980. The countries these foreign spouses come from are Korea (1,879), the U.S. (1,453), China (986), England (367), Brazil (290), the Philippines (156), and others. Among those couples, the spouses of the most successful couples are British, Brazilian, and American, whereas those of the most unsuccessful couples are Philippinos, Thais, and Chinese, according to the report issued by Japan’s Ministry of Welfare and Labor (2009).
My first experience in learning English language goes back to the 4th grade in an elementary school in a small town in Uzbekistan. I learned how to read and write in English. We did not have a permanent teacher as they kept changing each year. No one else around spoke English.

The only languages spoken in my family were Russian and Kazak. My mom tells me that I only spoke Kazakh until I turned three and then stopped speaking altogether for a few weeks after my parents enrolled me in a local “detski sad” (daycare center) where everyone only spoke in Russian. After those weeks passed, I started speaking Russian only. I was, however, still able to converse with my grandma in simple Kazakh as she did not speak any Russian.

When I first came to the United States of America the only phrase that I could say in English was “Hello, my name is Guljana and I am twenty-something years old.” I remember being shocked to see people on the street that did not know me at all smiling and saying “Hi.” It is not common to see people smiling in the former Soviet Union unless they are relatives or friends. I remember being shocked at the abundance of availability of anything and everything in supermarkets and the lack of long lines of people waiting to buy simple things like bread or sugar. My favorite store of all remains Home Depot as I thought it was “awesome” that one could buy all and any building supplies in one store. I thought of how my father, who used to be in charge of a construction business, would really enjoy seeing this kind of store.

The family that I stayed with when I first arrived in the U.S. advised me to join an international student volunteer organization to help with their service projects. I made friends with students from not only America, but also from Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Cambodia, Vietnam, Mexico, and Slovakia. They all spoke English and there was no one with whom I could speak Russian. I remember crying so hard almost every day for at least a month or two because I just could not understand a word anyone was saying to me. I was also very homesick as I had never traveled very far from home before coming to America. But I could not give up so easily as I know that many people immigrate or move to America with no knowledge of the language and master it. I had the hope that eventually it would get easier (in Russian there is a saying “you are not the first and you are not the last” – meaning, so many people suffered before you and will be still suffering after you, so keep on going and don’t give up).

You can imagine my joy when one day I realized that I actually understood what was being said to me and I could reply. It took about three or four months to get to that point. The hardest thing to understand was the radio and movies as it seemed that the announcers on the radio and the characters in the movies spoke far too quickly.

The only thing that kept me sane during that time was listening to music, playing the piano and writing to my family every week. In my letters I was recapturing my impressions of America, the places I’d seen, the friends I made, but I never admitted to my parents how hard it was for me because it was nothing compared to the hardships they faced every day in my country at the end of the Soviet era.

Now I can proudly say that although the first year in America was challenging, it was my most memorable one. It changed my life. I still keep in touch with some of the friends I made during that time. Many of them are settled and have children but we all still remember that time as a unique, challenging and fun opportunity for accelerated personal growth. It marked the beginning of my “road to happiness” that I am still on to this day.
What Would Confucius Say to Professor Tsai,
Author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*?

Professor Yulin Tsao

I think if Confucius were alive today, he would nod to Professor Tsai and say we should take the middle way! The way the world works is the middle course and the way to deal with everything is based on an immutable theory that does, however, allow for individual circumstances.

Ms. Tsai was strict with her children. Confucius said to one of his students that sometimes it was better to exchange children between families to teach them. It is hard to educate your own children without too much emotional entanglement. Education should be structured and consistent, requiring time and patience. Do all these characteristics translate into “strict”? Let us think about that.

Professor Tsai writes that she prepared detailed notes daily for her daughters just to practice piano and violin. It is a very competitive environment in the North East region and a student’s resume when applying to highly selective colleges has to be impressive. An Asian-American student not only needs to have received high achievements in music, but also to have excelled in a sport (showing they are “balanced” outside of the school settings), as well as have garnered commendations for extra-curriculum activities that highlight leadership skills. When is the children’s time for fun? Many parents realize that the system is pushing them not only to be stricter, but also to become increasingly involved in their kids’ lives to manage their time wisely.

It is true that the tiger mother did not teach her child to play the piano, but she scheduled and critiqued her daughters’ music performances in a much more efficient way. Famous music teachers in Fairfield County are given credit for how strict they are, an attribute that appears necessary in order to place their students in higher achieving groups. I have to admit that I admired Ms. Tsai for her ability and fortitude to write such detailed notes and wish when my daughter was young I had possessed the same skill in order to save her long hours of practice. However, I know that if I had applied as much pressure as the tiger mother, my daughter likely would have quit, because the fun aspects of playing the piano would have been lost in the technique.

Most Chinese parents believe that higher education will always guarantee their children a brighter future and that higher-ranking schools will improve the chances of success (while acknowledging a few exceptions like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs). However, if asked to express his opinion, Confucius would say that education can take place anywhere, and that enlightenment can be received at anytime. He also would say that whether the water is too warm or too cold will be known only by the person who drinks it. Were the notes for all that practice really helpful? Would the tension between husband and wife and mother and daughter truly have disappeared even if the fights had ended? To be strict or relaxed—Confucius would say take the middle way.

When is the right time to give guidance to children and the right time to let go? The answer is very different from child to child and hard for parents to know. Confucius enlightened his students individually and explained the same concept differently in specific settings. Some parents called “helicopter parents” will not let their children go at all. Even when the time has come for a child to leave home and venture out on him or her own, the “helicopter parent” continues to hover above.
According to an old Chinese saying, the fish may never grow to its full size if you have kept it in a small fish tank. Parents should know when to change the fish tank to a bigger one and have confidence in their child who, like the fish, will grow to its potential in the larger surroundings. However, it is easier said than done. Professor Tsai stated that throughout Chinese history the elderly have been dependent on their children. Parents maintained tight control to ensure their children will be nearby to care for them in their old age. However, this is not exactly the Confucian way. Confucius had said that children should not travel too far from their parents, but also stated that if it is necessary that they leave, plans should be given to parents.

Confucius wrote that if love and kindness flowed from parent to son, then obedience and service from son to parent naturally would occur. The fights and shouting matches that characterized Ms. Tsai’s household would never happen in a Confucian family. At the end, she had to give up her insistence and allow her second daughter to choose tennis over violin. Confucius would have said that the truth revealed itself!